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ABSTRACT

In 1965, the Policy Committee of the University of Utah was asked to evaluate the general education program (the basic courses required for graduation), and to make recommendations for its improvement. Students had found the old program rigid, a hurdle, irrelevant, and taught by left-over teachers. The Committee proposed that a new position of Dean of General Education be established, who have charge of a budget, and the authority to create an undergraduate curriculum. The Dean and the General Education Council, composed of faculty from the university at large, decided that English Composition was the only course absolutely necessary for each undergraduate. Five area requirements were created from which students could choose 4. Students were allowed to receive up to 48 hours of credit for passing standardized examinations. In addition, they were encouraged to write their own programs. Although there was some faculty and departmental opposition, it was overcome, new and exciting courses were created, and the student body seemed much more satisfied with the curriculum. (AF)

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THE INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM: PERSPECTIVES*

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I bring two perspectives to this topic today. One is the historical perspective of the recent developments in curriculum reform in the general education program at the University of Utah. The second perspective is analytical in that I will try to analyze the forces at work resisting change and demanding change in our program, hopefully with generalizations that will extend to other campuses. Actually it is difficult to keep these two perspectives separate. They may intertwine a bit as we move through this paper.

The concept of general education has been with us for decades of course. On our campus, as on many, it involves a core of course material that every undergraduate student is expected to complete in addition to the requirements of his major field. At Utah the general education program was to be completed by the student usually within his first two years. In fact, the student was dually enrolled in both general education and in his departmental major until he completed the general education requirements. This general education program consisted of two kinds of requirements, specific requirements and area requirements. The student needed to take specific courses in English composition, speech, physical education and health education. He also had to meet the requirements in four areas -- the humanities, the social sciences, the biological sciences, and the physical sciences.

When this program was created in the early 1940's it must have seemed a very rational solution to the elite young scholars who were then seeking admission to our campus country clubs. By 1965 an uneasiness concerning general education was developing in our campus community. The University's prestigious Policy Committee was wisely given the assignment to evaluate the general education program and make recommendations for its improvement. I say wisely because at this point of time there had not yet appeared the demonstrations of student unrest on campuses across the country. (This apparent wisdom may stem from over a century of almost defensive insistence by the University of Utah that it maintain academic excellence and freedom in a valley sometimes described as authoritarian). For the next two years this policy committee conducted its study, including interviews with a cross-section of both students and faculty. They concluded that general education was here to stay, but they reported certain consistent complaints. In particular the students felt that the general education program was merely a hurdle, requirements to be filled before one could really pursue the major course work which interested him. The courses seemed to carry the stigma of being merely introductions to special disciplines and hence were not seen as timely or relevant to the issues of the day. The program appeared to be parental and rigid with exemptions or waivers rarely granted. Finally the program appeared to be staffed with left-over teachers -- either regular faculty who were not alive to the

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research and publication push, or graduate students in need of support money. The Policy Committee made one specific recommendation for an administrative change, but proposed no specific curricular changes other than to recommend that a general education council be created to devise such changes.

The administrative change has proved to be an important one. The Director of General Education was removed from a position in the College of Letters and Science and awarded the full status of a Dean of General Education. The General Education Council was assigned to him and was to consist of faculty members from the University at large. Further, the Dean of General Education was no longer to be responsible for providing counselors for the students' first two years. (This function was split off to a newly created Dean of Academic Counseling.) For the first time on our campus then there appeared a dean charged with the responsibility of creating an undergraduate curriculum in general education -- and for the first time this curricular assignment was accompanied by a budget. This curricular reform was to be backed with power, both administratively and budgetarily.

Let us now pause at the year 1967 and examine the forces at work to maintain the status quo versus the above mentioned newly found power of a dean of general education and his council. The disciplinary departments are a strong force on our campus. During the preceding two decades nearly every department had firmly established at least one of its introductory courses into the general education program, giving the course a guaranteed captive audience of students and giving the department an opportunity to recruit majors. Why should any department want to give up such assurances for the cause of creating new courses or meddling with the general education requirements? Further, as student enrollment increased in these required courses it gave the department job opportunities for its graduate students as teaching assistants. Another powerful force developing over the years resided in the four general education area committees, inhabited mainly by department chairmen. Each of these committees determined which departmental courses were to be included in the area requirements. They had become comfortable with their decisions and saw no reasons to change. Still another force rested with the general education counselors who saw it as their duty to insist that students fill the requirements in the first two years.

Fortunately the administrative change recommended by the Policy Committee, then approved by the all-powerful Faculty Council, removed the power of the general education counselors by placing them under another dean. The new dean of general education and his council simply dissolved the area committees by never reappointing them. This left the departments and their chairmen to be dealt with, hopefully in a manner which would elicit their cooperation and not their condemnation. The General Education Council began its deliberations with the assumption that there now really was no general education program and a new one was to be invented. They called a meeting of all department chairmen and asked them to be thinking creatively -- to propose to us the wildest courses they had ever imagined or wanted to construct. In the meantime the General Education Council asked itself if there were any specific course that was absolutely necessary for every undergraduate student. We finally decided that English composition was the only such course, and we weren't too convinced that it was absolutely necessary for every student. This meant the elimination of requirements in such specific courses as speech, health education and physical education. (As could be expected these particular departments properly became our opponents when we later submitted our new program to the Faculty Council for its approval.)

Then the General Education Council began to examine the concept of area requirements. The four areas in past use still had a certain logic, even if only a logis of tradition. Yet to retain the original four areas might mean also retaining the rigidity of the past course offerings. We tried creating our own new bins and sorting the varied academic material of the University into these bins. We soon became engaged in what C. P. Snow would term the conflict of two cultures -- the hard sciences versus the humanities. Need the student in one of these be exposed to the material in the other? We finally compromised. We created five areas of subject matter with the stipulation that the student must do work in four out of the five. Actually we split the traditional humanities area into two parts, Western Civilization and Fine Arts. The remaining three areas were enlargements of the traditional remaining three areas -- Social and Behavioral Sciences, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences. By allowing a student to satisfy his general education program with the completion of work in only four areas of the five areas we essentially endorsed a slight specialization in general education. We expected that a student would complete at least one of the four areas by the work done in his major, leaving three more areas, one of which might still be quite closely related to his major. Yet even if a student opted out of the Physical Sciences he would still catch the essence of the hard sciences through his work in the Life Sciences area. Similarly if a student opted out of Western Civilization, he would still catch an historical perspective in either the Social and Behavioral Sciences area or the Fine Arts area. Most importantly, such a plan was removing some of the rigidity complained of by the students.

Having not yet heard anything very imaginative from the department chairmen, we called for five half-day meetings with department chairmen during the summer of 1968. Each of these five half-day meetings was devoted to a separate one of our five new areas. Every department head was invited to every session since we wanted to break down the traditional barriers felt by departments and supported by the former area committees. Ideas for new courses and interdepartmental sequences began to emerge from these summer meetings. It seems we had convinced them that the old program was indeed finished, that the old barriers were dissolved.

Another debate within the General Education Council was now beginning to develop around the best procedure for a student to receive material within an area. It was agreed that an area should be considered complete when the student had taken three courses within it -- but three courses how chosen? One could argue that the three courses should be planned and taken sequentially by the students. One could also argue that each student should pick his own three from a cafeteria assortment. How would good teaching be guaranteed in either case? We compromised in a bicameral fashion by providing both solutions -- two alternative routes for satisfying the three courses in an area. Route A was to be a three quarter sequence, hopefully interdepartmental and funded by the Dean of General Education. Route B was for the student to pick three instructors from a list provided in each area and to take a course from each. We planned to place only our best general-education-type faculty in each of the area B lists. I might as well confess in advance that this proposed listing of star instructors turned out to be politically impossible. We finally settled for placing in the B list the names of the courses they taught instead of listing the actual faculty names themselves. Again we had reached a solution which provided further flexibility for the student in choosing his own pathway. In addition we had opened the door for the development of a new interdepartmental effort in the creation of relevant courses to be financed by new money from the Dean of General Education. Further we had our foot in the door for using only the better faculty in these undergraduate courses.

To give today's student even more freedom in choosing his general education program we formed two additional policies. First was a plicy for awarding credit in general education areas by satisfactorily passsing a well standardized examination in the area. We chose the examinations in the College Level Examination Program. The policy declared that a student could earn up to 48 hours of credit by such examination, which could be accomplished if he passed with a sufficient score in four areas. We also would allow a waiver in one or more areas for a less satisfactory score. The second policy encouraged students to write their own program if they had something better in mind. This could consist of relevant work done off campus or abroad or it could consist of courses already available on campus. The student would be required to submit his proposal for the approval of the Dean of General Education, who was instructed by the General Education Council to act as a grand lama with as liberal an attitude as possible.

This new program was approved by Faculty Council and placed in operation in the autumn of 1969. We now need to analyze the politics of that approval and the subsequent failure or success of this curricular innovation. The battle in Faculty Council for the approval of this program lasted for two half days of five hours each. The specific departments whose courses had been eliminated as no longer being required for every student were the first to lose their battle. But they went down like gentlemen. Generally their course enrollment has not been seriously affected. Students still opt to take their courses even though they are not under the umbrella of general education. These departments have been invited to submit courses in any of the areas and have done so. The larger and longer battle whirled around the issue of the General Education Council approving only B list courses which were taught by faculty with a proven flair for general education. The departments challenged our right and ability to choose such faculty. We settled on a double veto. The General Education Council cannot name a departmental faculty member without the approval of the department and the department cannot name a faculty member on the general education program without the approval of the General Education Council. Now that the program is under way this has still been a touchy area with one or two departments. It is indeed difficult to determine who are the best faculty for teaching general education courses. What criteria? Popularity? The humorous lecturer? An easy grader? Fortunately we did have some basic data to work with. Our student government had already initiated a course evaluation program, where at least once a year every instructor is rated on a short questionnaire by the students in his class. In addition we have built a longer rating sheet and are now administering it in every general education class at the close of each term. With such data we hope to build a solid base for these difficult decisions -- a base that will be agreed upon by both the department chairmen and the Council.

But have any new courses come forward? Indeed they have. Gratifyingly so. This has been mostly true in the A list, or sequence courses in each area. This is probably a function of the support money to the Dean of General Education has available for such courses. In the Western Civilization area there are two three-quarter sequences now in operation. The first, Intellectual Tradition of the West, was lifted almost entirely from the old humanities program where it had been the only successful interdepartmental sequence in the University. The second is an interdepartmental effort between Economics and History on the topic of Revolution and Continuity in Western Tradition. In the Fine Arts area one new sequence is in operation and it is an exciting one. Titled The Artist in Each of Us, it incorporates the team teaching efforts of six faculty representing the departments of Architecture, Art, English Literature, Modern Dance, Music and Theater. It includes a laboratory experience each week where the students rotate through the six faculty experts and are encouraged to do their own thing in each field. The

Social and Behavioral Sciences area contains a new sequence course titled Man: the Individual, Social Groups and Culture. A second sequence is under way which will be called Richlands and Poorlands: Problems of Development. The first of these is an interdepartmental effort between Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology, while the second will involve Economics, Political Science, and Georgraphy. The Life Science area involves two sequences also. The first was lifted from the old biology program and is rather traditional. The second sequence was built primarily for juniors or seniors in the hard science area. It is actually a bioengineering sequence including faculty from Biology and Engineering. The Physical Science area contains a new sequence entitled Earth and Man involving the departments of Geology, Geophysics and Geography. Another sequence which has not yet gotten off the ground hopes to involve a philosopher, an historian, and a physicist.

The B list of departmental individual courses has sprouted a few innovations. The College of Law is now offering an undergraduate course on Law and the Social Process. The College of Engineering is now offering a course on the impact of technology on society. The Psychology Department introduced a new course on the psychology of social issues. The Sociology Department offered a course on Understanding Minorities in Utah. Still on the drawing board is a proposed new sequence in film study. We are not quite certain which area it belongs in. It may become some sort of a wild card. A sequence in the non-Western world is trying to be born. A course in comparative urban development focusing on the ghetto is being considered.

Is the student body pleased with this new general education program? The answer appears to be an overwhelming yes. They like the flexibility which allows them more choice in meeting the general education requirements. They also like the idea that general education is no longer to be done in the first two years, but can be done at any time during the undergraduate program and includes upper division courses as well as lower division courses. They like the relevance that has been introduced in the newly created courses.

In summary can we analyze why this curricular innovation worked? One factor is certainly the creation of a dean whose position parallels that of other college deans and who has a budget to offer departments who will participate in sequence courses. Second was the creation of a General Education Council consisting of faculty who were not committed to their departmental loyalties. To this council have been added two students at large whose contributions have been particularly valuable. Third, the time was ripe. The time for relevant courses, better instructors and less rigidity was upon us. The forces at work to maintain the status quo -- and these forces were represented by admirable men -- were balanced against the above factors. Change won out. My hope is that the new program and the forces which brought it about will not themselves become jelled into the status quo. They must contain their own capacity for continual change. If the General Education Council and I decide that our work is perfect and completed, we are in trouble.